BISS Biodiversity Information Science and Standards

Biodiversity Information Science and Standards 2: e26015
doi: 10.3897/biss.2.26015

OPEN ACCESS

Conference Abstract

Kōhatu Mauri: An Exercise in Practice across Cultures

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Received: 20 Apr 2018 | Published: 13 Jun 2018

Citation: Wesley R, Burns E (2018) Kōhatu Mauri: An Exercise in Practice across Cultures. Biodiversity Information Science and Standards 2: e26015. https://doi.org/10.3897/biss.2.26015

Abstract

The 2017 redevelopment of Otago Museum's Discovery World into Tūhura, a bi-cultural science centre that reflected an indigenous Kāi Tahu understanding of the universe alongside a western scientific paradigm, was a bold move into new territory for museum staff, who had to become familiar with not only new forms of knowledge, but also to work comfortably with Kāi Tahu tikanga (values-based practice) and cultural beliefs.

An integral component of the creation of a space reflective of a Māori worldview is the placement of a Kōhatu Mauri - a small boulder or rock loaded with symbolism that encapsulates the mauri, or 'lifeforce' of a space. In order to enhance its value as a receptacle for the mauri of such a space, a Kōhatu Mauri must be touched, thus increasing the actual mauri it contains. If a Kōhatu Mauri is treated as a typical museum object, isolated and untouched, the result is culturally akin to death and is symbolic of a lack of life and perceived value of its wider space.

To fit with Kāi Tahu notions of value, a Kōhatu Mauri is usually selected according to aesthetic, historic, and whakapapa (genealogy) values. It must be firmly rooted in its cultural context, regardless of the space it inhabits.

When the need for a Kōhatu Mauri for Tūhura was identified, short timeframes and recognition of the need to select a boulder that captured the above cultural values resulted

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in the selection of a sarsen stone that had recently been acquired for the geological collections of the Otago Museum. The transition of the sarsen stone into a Kōhatu Mauri highlighted an anomaly in how collection items are valued. When objects that hold a special cultural value for a community come into a museum environment, they tend to lose that value by being removed from their cultural context. This paper will explore how the opposite happened in the case of the sarsen stone transitioning into a Kōhatu Mauri. The contradictions and confusion around understanding multiple layers of meaning and value in a collection item resulted in the Kōhatu Mauri ultimately losing its museum value while in the process of regaining its cultural value.

Keywords

Collection, Culture, Indigenous knowledge, Kōhatu Mauri

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